

# Managing Groups

Managing groups is not always easy. Students are excited to work with their friends, share their opinions, go on a field trip, or get a chance to work outside. All of these activities are great and should be encouraged in the classroom but it is important to still be able to manage the class and keep the activity fun and safe for everyone involved.

## **Group Routines**

Routines are essential for group management. Routines create safe and positive environments for student learning as well as keeping the students aware of what to expect during class time. Since routines are so important to the classroom, they take time to perfect. As Brenda Angotti, a music teacher in Millinocket, ME who is in her 40<sup>th</sup> year of teaching, states, “It isn’t easy to have the “rules” the same as they were yesterday and that they will be when the students come the next time. That being said, consistency is what makes managing a classroom easier because the students always know the expectations as well as the consequences” (Angotti, Personal Communication, March 23, 2014). The following section offers tips to help create strong routines that keep the class running well.

Seating charts can be a great group routine so everyone knows where each student will be sitting and so the teacher can easily learn names. These charts are probably best at the beginning of the year so the teacher can use them to learn the student’s names and so students can as well. When considering seating arrangements, it is important for all students to be able to see the teacher and the board clearly. The room should be well organized so students may easily find the pencil sharpener, trash cans, and drop-boxes for completed assignments.

Creating clear expectations are a key factor to good group routines and teachers should be consistent role models. Classroom expectations should be similar to the school-wide expectations and should be fair but still firmly enforced. Enforcing the expectations sends the message to students that the rules are important and will be taken seriously. Enforcement of the rules also makes dealing with behavior issues easier and quicker because both the student and teacher know how such behavior will be handled and what the consequences are. If issues do arise, stay

calm and reasonable while dealing with the situation. The teacher should not try to “win” because they have power, as this will make the situation even worse for the teacher and student.

As you create your expectations here are some important ideas to consider: How will you handle absent and dismissed students? What about interruptions during class? What should you do if one of your students wanders around the room or leaves too frequently? How will you handle inappropriate behavior in the classroom? Make the expectations clear to students, whether it is through going over the syllabus, making them available on a class website, or simply just posting them in the room so they are a visual reminder. Do not ask students to do anything you would not be comfortable with doing. Don’t forget to consider how you will show each student that they are important to the class. Students will feel encouraged if they know they are respected and important to the teacher. The teacher should acknowledge the accomplishments of every student. Brenda Angotti says, “It is so important to notice and encourage the positive behaviors and accomplishments even if they are only small steps.” Also remember that it is okay to make a change in routines if you find a change is needed.

### **Effective Class Discussions**

A great classroom promotes student collaboration and participation in class. However, many teachers struggle with creating this welcoming environment without also causing behavior problems that are difficult to manage. Angotti explains that keeping middle school students on task but still participating was a challenge throughout her career. “Usually it was because some days they really didn’t like who they were and just needed to have time to work things out and know that the adult in charge would still appreciate their good qualities and continue to hold them to a high standard that each and every one of them knew they could attain.” One way to help students reach these high standards is to unite them with a common goal and allow them to express their ideas through strong group discussions.

In order for group discussions to be effective, however, all students need to feel that the room is a safe environment for them to express their ideas and that their input is important. A good class discussion should allow students to talk about sensitive issues without creating an uncomfortable feeling within the classroom. A way to accomplish this atmosphere is to make the topics of discussion concepts that all students can contribute to. When students feel confident about the material they are discussing, they can easily develop new thoughts and opinions to

share. During group discussions, the teacher should act as the facilitator of the conversation and never judge any idea a student expresses. The teacher should make sure that all comments are positive and do not put down any other student's ideas. While discussing, students will naturally judge each other's ideas they have shared but this is important to the discussion because it is part of the process students go through to develop their own opinions on the subject. Each student should get an opportunity to share their thoughts. This being said, the discussion should not be dominated by one or two students. "When you spend too much time with individuals for any reason you lose the rest of the class" (B. Angotti, personal communication, ).

If you plan on having a discussion during class, make sure the room is arranged so that each student can see one another. During discussion, humans naturally want to look into the eyes of the people they are talking to so we should allow this to happen in the classroom. As with anything in life, practice makes perfect. Discussions will become very meaningful and easy to manage if they are a frequent event in the classroom. Students will become use to sharing their ideas this way and will grow to be more and more comfortable with taking the risk to participate in the discussion.

### **Managing a Large Class**

More often than not, teachers fee negatively towards large classes because they feel that smaller classes yield better learning results. However, scientific research, "denies the existence of a very close correlation between the number of pupils in a class and the academic results of those pupils (Vale'rien, 1991, p. 7)" (as cited in O'Sullivan, 2006). Although it is reassuring to know that students still learn just as well in big classes, this information does not remove the challenges of working with a large class. Teachers of large classrooms must find time to assess the larger amount of work they receive from students while still giving valuable and accurate feedback to the students. These teachers must also create a positive, comfortable atmosphere in a room that may be over crowded and cramped. This section provides strategies to overcome these challenges.

In a large classroom, teachers must find creative ways to keep all of the students entertained and engaged. One way to do this is to teach very clearly so all students can hear and understand. Ask lots of questions that will keep the students thinking about the material but

remember to always be enthusiastic. Students will want to stay interested in the class if they see that their teacher is passionate about the subject and is enjoying teaching.

Since it is not easy to give individualized attention to students in larger classes, have the students work in small groups. While students are working in groups, encourage each student to be a leader and contribute equally to the group. Small groups create meaningful and engaged learning in a personalized way that might otherwise not be easy to create. Students who are introverts or intrapersonal learners will feel more comfortable to participate in these small groups because it is less intimidating to speak in front of three or four peers than a group of twenty or more. While students are working in groups, signals are effective tools to use as means of getting their attention once again. Silent signals are much more effective and peaceful than yelling to the entire class. If behavior problems arise during class work signals can stop it as well. “Many times all it takes is a glance, moving nearer the student, calling on that student” (Angotti, Personal Communication, March 23, 2014). When creating groups, keep differentiated instruction in mind, since large scale differentiation is not always easy. Learning styles and individual needs can be met through incorporating differentiation into the small groups. It is also important to allow the students to make choices in big classes so they are all engaged and feeling important.

### **Group Work Management**

While group work is especially helpful in large classes, it should be an essential practice in every classroom. Most of the careers students will have once they graduate will require them to collaborate with their colleagues. Learning good collaboration skills at an early age is very important. Successful group work requires clear expectations from the teacher, as well as good supervision. “Teachers must set clear expectations and devise a fair and meaningful way to assess student work. Most important, the teacher should constantly be circulating around the room, looking over shoulders, asking and answering questions, giving feedback, and taking notes on student progress” (Quinn, 2012, p. 47).

To create strong group work skills in the classroom, start out with small group projects that eventually lead to bigger projects. This strategy will allow the students to develop their collaboration skills because the risks are lower and they have time. The first few group projects will work best if students have time to finish them in class. While the students are working, keep an agenda either on the board so they know the tasks they are expected to complete. The teacher

may assign roles within the group as well so students know what their individual responsibilities are. Once students know how to work well in a group, they are ready to move on to bigger group assignments. These assignments should still be monitored by the teacher but the students should also be allowed more autonomy. Since these bigger projects will most likely be finished outside of class time, the teacher should have each student keep a log of their group work. This way, the teacher can get a good idea of the group dynamics and how well each student participated. After the project is over, the students should fill out a reflection that will help them understand how they felt they did in the group and what they would like to work on for the next assignment. Possible questions to ask students to consider in their reflection include: What did you feel you did well on? What did you feel your group did poorly on? What would you like to improve for next time? As students become better at working in groups, they will not require as much teacher oversight.

Group work can be very effective for student learning and is very applicable to the real world. However, it does not come without challenges. As you create your own group work assignments there are many possible issues that you should consider. Students may not always work well in a group or they may fight to be put in a different group. Some students may not like each other and create problems within the group. It is up to the teacher whether they should change the groups but working with people we may not get along with is a fact of life and is a valuable skill for students. If the room is cramped, students may want to bring their group somewhere else to work. If students are talking with their group members, they may be disruptive to other students who are trying to work in study areas. When students reach the higher levels of group work where the assignment will be finished outside of class time, schedule and transportation conflicts can occur. Before assigning group work, teachers should consider these, as well as other issues that can arise, so they can help students overcome these issues while still experiencing the best possible group collaboration.

### **Management While Outdoors and on Trips**

Taking students outdoors and on trips is fun and exciting for everyone involved but many teachers do not do it because they are afraid of losing control of the students and they are comfortable to their classroom environment and fear leaving its safe confines. According to Darius Kalvatis, getting students ready for making the outdoors your classroom only takes three

easy steps: 1) Establish ground rules for behavior outside, 2) Practice the rules while the class is still inside, and 3) Start with small outdoor activities that lead to larger ones.

While the class is still inside, establish the rules. It is crucial for the teacher to always know where the students are during an outside activity. The teacher should explain where the boundaries are to students so they know where they can and cannot explore. Students will be more willing to accept these boundaries if they understand why they are in place. The teacher should also explain clearly why they must stay within the boundaries. Within the boundaries, create a meeting spot for everyone. When the teacher wants students' attention, they should use signals that can have different meaning. For example, a flag could be held up when the teacher wants students to listen where they are and a whistle can be blown when students should return to the decided meeting spot. During times when the class is gathered, the teacher should always be sure to face the sun so the students do not have to be looking into the sun while they are trying to pay attention to directions. Kalvatis says, "Be prepared for surprises. Just as this is a novel learning experience for your students, it is also an opportunity for you to learn"(p. 37). Kalvatis also suggests not to go outside as a reward, rather outside time should be worked into the curriculum so students have a more meaningful and educational experience.

While the students are inside, everyone should practice the rules for outside. Actually acting out the rules will help students internalize and remember them better when it comes time to go outside. As the teacher is explaining the rules of the outdoors they may call on student volunteers to act out the appropriate behavior. During this process, the teacher should allow room for students to add rules they think would be applicable and make them feel safer while they are outside. The teacher should also praise the students for being well behaved in the classroom and tell them that they believe they can handle going outside. Going outside would not have been an option if they were misbehaving students. After students know the rules it is time to go outside! Teachers can start with small, low-risk outdoor activities to get students acclimated to going outside. Students will know that if they behave well outside, they will be allowed to go out again.

Just as there is much work involved with going outside, Angotti explains there is a lot of planning to do before a field trip and lots of management while on the trip. Before taking students on a field trip, it is very important to create detailed plans of the trip. Students should be aware of these plans and be provided with a clear agenda so they will know what they will be

doing. While on a trip, students should understand that the classroom rules still apply even though they are no longer in the school. Teachers should be proactive and plan to bring an appropriate number of chaperones on the trip. This way, students can be kept safe through the entire experience.

## **Conclusion**

Managing groups is very possible for every teacher in any situation. All it takes is good planning, patience, compassion, and lots of practice. These sections were provided to give teachers ideas of for managing groups that can serve as a base for other skills and techniques they will pick up throughout their schooling and career. Teachers should never give up and know that if things are going wrong, it is okay to change their routines. Everything is a learning experience and group management will grow easier with time.

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